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ABSTRACT

What astounds one writing teacher is what her students do with the reflective writing portion of a portfolio assignment, where they are instructed to use reflective writing to bring together their portfolio submissions into one cohesive unit. The class members first discuss the assignment, look at abandoned portfolios from previous semesters, and read a brief article on options for constructing reflective writing. But the teacher makes it clear to them that how they choose to tie together the elements of their portfolios is up to them. This paper aims to demonstrate that, while students may regard the reflective writing component of the portfolio as simply another assignment they must complete to pass the course, they are actually engaging in important processes that act to link classroom experience and life experience. The paper looks at the convergence of reflective writing, the contact zone, and metaphor to support the assertion that compositionists can benefit greatly by engaging in some reflective practices of their own. First, it briefly outlines the basics of contact zone principles and reflective writing, followed by an overview of the difficulties with the two. Then, it discusses metaphor because the teacher thinks that how students use metaphor can yield valuable information. Next, the paper examines some excerpts which demonstrate how one of the teacher's students used metaphor. It shares what the teacher has learned by looking closely at the student's reflective writing. And finally, the paper proposes what the teacher still sees as problematic in this area. (Contains a 12-item selected bibliography.) (NKA)

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by Linda E. Holt

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The Experienced Curriculum of the Contact Zone:
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CCCC 2002
Linda E. Holt

I sit huddled in my windowless office, five days into the final exam period, surrounded by stacks of student portfolios arranged on the floor, on the desk, and on my work table. Before me are spread some of my most creative submissions: One is cleverly designed as a record jacket; another is professionally bound with the student's original artwork on the cover; yet another looks like a tiny suitcase. Each contains a minimum of twenty-five pages of student writing that I must read before I can determine my students' final grades.

So why do I do this? Why, for the last five years, have I adamantly retained a teaching practice that makes so much work for me at the very point in the semester when I am most eager to be finished, to turn in my grades and put the semester behind me?

The answer to this question is multifaceted, and if I wanted to sound really professional and bore us all silly, I could launch into a lengthy treatise on the theory surrounding portfolio use: how they encourage agency by decentralizing the classroom, giving students more authority in the grading process, and guiding students toward taking responsibility for their own writing processes.

If I went for the shorter, and in my opinion, far more interesting answer, however, I would tell you that what astounds me is what my students do with the reflective writing portion of the portfolio assignment, where they are instructed to use reflective writing to bring together their portfolio submissions into one cohesive unit. We discuss the assignment, we look at abandoned portfolios from previous semesters, and we read a

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brief article on options for constructing reflective writing. But I make it clear that how they choose to tie together the elements of their portfolio is up to them.

And what they produce is what has led me to this presentation, to my desire to explore in some systematic and purposeful fashion my felt sense that reflective writing is a valuable source of information for me about how students navigated my classes, what they actually learned, and what gave them difficulty. In short, student reflective writing may serve as a medium for practitioner reflection, thus helping us to better understand the experienced curriculum. As I hope I will demonstrate by the end of my talk, while students may regard the reflective writing component of the portfolio as simply another assignment they must complete in order to pass the course, they are actually engaging in important processes that act to link classroom experience and life experience.

The reflective writing I am currently researching emerged from a composition class where I constructed the course around the theme of the contact zone, a term I will explain in more detail in just a moment. For this presentation, I have chosen to look at the convergence of reflective writing, the contact zone, and metaphor in order to support my assertion that compositionists can benefit greatly by engaging in some reflective practices of their own.

First, I will briefly outline the basics of contact zone principles and reflective writing, followed by an overview of the difficulties with the two. Then, I'll discuss metaphor because I think how students use metaphor can yield valuable information; next, I will show you some excerpts demonstrating how one of my students used metaphor. Next, I will share with you what I have learned by looking closely at her reflective writing. And finally, I will propose what I still see as problematic in this area.

Just a little background on Mary Louise Pratt: her article, "Arts of the Contact Zone," was published in 1991 and has been highly influential in composition studies. She defines the contact zone as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power." With Pratt's emphasis in the article on teaching and writing, including a list of practices she describes as the pedagogical arts of the contact zone, many in the era of the social turn in composition studies saw parallels between the classroom and the contact zone. Pratt further entices us with a description of her personal experiences in her own classroom, which she claims…:

> …functioned not like a homogeneous community or a horizontal alliance but like a contact zone....It was the most exciting teaching [I] had ever done. The very nature of the course put ideas and identities on the line. Virtually every student was having the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it. Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom--the joys of the contact zone. (594-595)

Who wouldn't be intrigued by such claims and eager for similar experiences in one's own classroom?

Reflective writing advocates also make enticing claims. Reflection, defined by fellow panelist Tony Baker as the written product that results from exercises that ask or allow students to write in some way about their own writing, makes it possible for students to witness their own learning, claims Kathleen Blake Yancey. Further, states Yancey, reflection facilitates a new kind of learning as well as a new kind of teaching (6,8). Others, among them Pat Belanoff and James Berlin, postulate that reflection

heightens rhetorical awareness and helps students develop agency.

Contact zone principles and reflective writing do provide wonderful pedagogical opportunities that have enriched many of our classrooms. Yet implementation has proved problematic and hence, controversial. Some purported shortcomings of the contact zone article include assertions that Pratt provides too little guidance, leaving yawning chasms for innocent practitioners to stumble into unawares (Joseph Harris); that implementation of contact zone practices may actually promote discourse that allows the voicing of racist, sexist, and homophobic viewpoints in the classroom (Richard Miller); and that practitioners who are unprepared for such discourse resort to teaching models that reinscribe traditional power structures (Bruce Horner). Reflective writing, too, has its critics, who claim that such assignments produce "teacher pleasing" "schmoozy" documents (Irwin Weiser) that further reinforce the colonized atmosphere of the postmodern composition classroom. Ellen Schendel and Peggy O'Neill have ethical concerns about requiring a type of writing they describe as "forced confessional." Others, among them Peter Elbow and Glenda Conway, caution of the increased difficulty of objectivity with the inclusion of reflective writing in portfolios because practitioners are confronted with a more fully-rounded, vulnerable human being. caution of the increased difficulty of objectivity when confronted with an entire sheaf of student essays: rather than getting the student five pages at a time, practitioners are confronted with a more fully-rounded, vulnerable human being.

Having read a considerable amount of reflective writing composed by students, I am convinced that central to better implementing and understanding Pratt's pedagogical goals outlined in the contact zone article is in closer examination and study of that

reflective writing. Reflective writing asks students to begin with what they have already written. They must go back to the essays they composed earlier in the course and look for connections and patterns, meaning their essays are not end products but steps in a process. Asking students to reflect means they cannot simply stick their writing into a folder and turn it in. Ideally, they will gather the writing produced for the semester and go over it carefully, looking for some way to bridge the goals of the course with their own writing--and I find they often use extended metaphor as a means to do this.

As we all know, metaphor is a pervasive part of our language, providing ways for us to bridge gaps, to express the inexpressible. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors help us to structure reality; David Leary says they are one of the major means by which we steer our way through life. Composition Studies has wrangled over what to do with metaphor--is it something we should encourage or discourage in student writing--but recent articles suggest what I suspect when my students use metaphor in reflective writing; namely, that metaphor is the visible manifestation of the thinking and learning process. David Leary claims that metaphor is often produced at the "edges" of our knowledge, "in the regions where we are most pressed to give form to things unknown" (par. 27). Sam Watson expresses a similar point of view by asserting that metaphor "indicates what is beyond a text, [acting as] part of a constellation pointing toward something as yet unknown. James Seitz, drawing upon the theories of Derrida and Ricoeur, remarks that "metaphor serves as the very process by which new concepts are produced" (289)

This is the point at which things get messy--the point where contact zone ideas, reflective writing, and metaphor come together. According to Pratt, if a classroom is

designed "as a social world unified and homogenized with respect to the teacher, whatever students do other than what the teacher specifies is invisible or anomalous" (592). It is this very invisibility that we need to investigate in order to better understand the experienced curriculum; and by assigning reflective writing, we are providing students with the opportunity to make visible the invisible.

At this point, I want us to turn to the excerpts I selected from one student's reflection just to demonstrate why I see potential here for practitioner reflection.

(*read the excerpts they have on the handout*)

Excerpt one: *"I was in the contact zone, a tumultuous little place. It was as if I was forced to confront my own prejudices and everyone else's all at once. It was a place all in white, emanating light like it was its own star. There was a port with a dock and white waves lapping silently against its edges. There were ships everywhere, carrying all sorts of people and ideas, religions and beliefs. There was so much color it all looked white, so many differences they all looked the same."*

Excerpt two*: "...a ship full of witches came sailing in from the north; it nearly ran into a ship full of Buddhists. They were angry at each other, calling names, accusing heresy. Then ...a new bigger ship with a great mast and a crowd of passengers burst into the port, full of Muslims, Christians, Pantheists, Druids, monks, every kind of religious person you could imagine. There was so much color it hurt my eyes."*

Excerpt three: *"The merchant was at the very end of a long, loud, and boisterous parade. The sinuous and trumpeting line of crazed folk appeared...very foreign to the contact zone port, even more foreign than me because they were looking around in awe. And they weren't just ordinary people, either. They weren't men or women--they were somehow both.... The crowd was distraught because they could not determine the sex of these creatures. Were they men or women?"*

What she has done is she's set up her reflection as a dream, and these excerpts are part of that dream. So first of all, it seems she is using the imaginative boundlessness of dreams as a sort of distancing device--in this place she envisions, this contact zone place, it's okay to talk about Pantheists and Druids and witches in the same breath as Christians--(and I teach at a Baptist-affiliated university in Nashville, TN--the buckle of the Bible

belt). In the third excerpt she raises a similarly hot-button topic--gender stereotyping. Both of these topics had been elements of classroom discussion based on readings I had assigned. We discussed them with trepidation, however. And here, through her use of metaphor, I see that she's continued to think about these topics. I see the extension of classroom discussion to her imaginative conception of a world where such prejudices might not exist.

Also in excerpt one, she acknowledges that she was forced to confront her own prejudices. In isolation, this may not seem significant--but I was whis same idea expressed in several other reflections. My students, well educated, middle class, primarily white--realized in my class that they are prejudiced. I only knew they had learned this about themselves because of their reflections. My sample students here is able to voice this recognition through the scrim of several layers of metaphor: the contact zone, the dream, the ships.

So what else does her writing tell me? I'm not sure, but her repeated use of color, light, and white seems significant. And the ships and the port; I believe these are called circuit metaphors, but again, I'm not sure how this matters. Was it simply the easiest way for my students to bring all these cultures together? And why are they together? What has brought them all to this same port? She never says--the dream frame gives her an out. She does seem to be thinking that direct confrontation is the only way to address issues of prejudice.

So does her writing bear out the assertions about metaphor that I discussed earlier? Is my student trying to give form to ideas hovering at the "edges" of her knowledge? Are her metaphors the stars in a larger constellation she cannot yet see?

And can practitioner reflection on student reflection help us better implement contact zone ideas?

The only one of these questions I can confidently answer "yes" to is the last one. As I went through my stack of portfolios, unpacking the tiny suitcase, reading the liner notes on the LP jacket, and marveling at how my student's artwork complements her writing, I witnessed the contact zone at work. Ideas and identities were on the line, and new wisdom did begin taking shape, but I may not have been as aware of the degree to which this was happening if it hadn't been for the reflective writing.

The experienced curriculum? Yes indeed.

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